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ABSTRACT

This paper examines changes in social attitudes toward preschool institutional care in the Czech Republic over the last 50 years and discusses whether the present economic situation enables Czech families to decide which type of preschool care to choose for their children. The historic period is divided into two time periods for analysis: (1) the real socialism period (1950s to 1980s); and (2) the 1990s. The socialism period was characterized by the introduction of nursery schools and kindergartens to give mothers of small children a chance for full involvement in the labor force and resulted in well over 90 percent of 3- to 5-year-olds attending such institutions. The intellectual and ideological bent of these schools resulted in many parents abandoning them following political changes in 1989, as many nursery schools and kindergarten became subject to professional and public criticism. Children-friendlier kindergartens have been developing since the mid-1990s, with nursery schools almost disappearing. Findings from Czech respondents in the 1991 European Value Study reflected frustrations stemming from the socialist period when mothers were forced to work and did not trust communist child care. Findings from the 1999 survey suggest that current kindergartens meet parents' expectations more than previously and that working parents have become less apprehensive of using the services. Further, attitudes toward women's roles in the family and workplace are slowly changing, with many Czechs favoring traditional households. (KB)

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Opportunities for Child of pre-school age and his/her Family in Czech Republic in 90's: a comparison with previous times

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Abstract:

The presentation deals with the problem of attitudes to the pre-school institutional care of Czech children. The attitudes to pre-school care have changed during the last fifty years. They have fluctuated between two poles: one was suggesting that children should be raised by the family while the other was advocating the institutional care and education. Concrete economic, political and social conditions have played important role here.

As a result, there has been one of the largest proportions of children who attended pre-school facilities in the Czech republic in the past. Also the participation rate of Czech women at labour force has been one of the highest in Europe. Such development has been seen by many, however, as negative. They have pointed out to the possible effects of weakening family ties, of insufficient choice for parents and of education without proper emotional relations.

Basic questions of this presentation will be as follows: What are the attitudes of Czech population to this problem now? Does the present economic situation enable to Czech families to decide which type of pre-school care to choose for their children? What are the opportunities for children and their families to fined the best solution for all of them?

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This paper[1] deals with care for the small children (age 6 month to 6 years) in the Czech Republic. Taking into consideration the main topic of pre-school child care, i.e. optimal child development and a high quality of the child's life, we have to look for environment and conditions allowing for achieving this goal. Undoubtedly, this pedagogical and psychological approach emphasises the child's interests. Taking the child into account is a must. However, all of us are very well aware of the fact that in day-to-day life, it is the parents' needs rather than child's interests that matter in most cases due to a number of economic, social, ideological and political reasons or simply a personal lifestyle of the parents. This pragmatic view rather than emphasising the child's interests as the sole priority, frequently takes into account other social and individual/ family factors.

On the social level, parents have the right to decide whether and when they put their child in a pre-school facility no matter what motivates them. The society (state) is then obliged to create conditions for the decision-making and an offer to chose from. This obligation of the state needs to be mentioned not only as a support provided to the family but also with regards to interests of the society. The idea that life-long learning starts much earlier than after graduating from the primary school is gaining. Public pre-school care is considered the first phase in creating a learning society based on life-long learning as well as requirements for ensuring equal educational opportunities and preventing social exclusion. This follows, *inter alia*, from documents of the OECD and European Union (Pre-school, 1994; A Review of Services, 1996) and the attention these institutions and others have been paying to pre-school care and education.

On individual level, however, the problem is not that clear-cut. Parents have to keep deciding what is the best care their child can receive and how they can provide this "best" care. They have to take into consideration their abilities to take care of the child and conditions they have or are able to create. Since the life calls for compromises, in most cases a balance between the best solutions for the child and parents has to be sought. Especially, the role of women in the family and society affects the decision-making on putting a child in the public pre-school care the most. It is related to division of labour within the society, value structures of the partners, their relationships, and an overall household composition. The role of the woman's/ mother's job is a clear indication of this role. Regardless of motivation that led the

[1] Research for this paper was supported by the Grant Agency of the Czech Republic, Research Project 403/99/0326 "European Value Study 1999 – the Czech Republic".

mother of a pre-school child to take up a job, the child's age, social and emotional maturity allowing for public socialisation, ability to depart from the closest people, the time to be spent outside the home, etc. are important. Parents have to contemplate whether the child and family can handle the mother's job resulting in other changes in child care and household (Rabušicová, 1991-92). In the Czech Republic, this decision is frequently determined by an economic or other pressure the family has to cope with. Parents opting for a kindergarten even with the mother being a housewife are rather rare before the child begins preparing for school[2] and in most cases, the child would not spend but a few morning hours in the kindergarten.

Let me now explore individual attitudes to pre-school child care and education in the past decades in the Czech Republic. I will also examine the social context within which all these attitudes developed. Undoubtedly, it has been rather a complex and controversial development corresponding to important political, social and economic changes the Czech Republic has experienced in the second half of the 20th century.

a) Real Socialism Period (the 1950s – 1980s)

Supposedly to liberalise women, make them equal and achieve their full employment, nursery schools (creches) and kindergartens for children from 6 months to 3 years and from 3 to 6 years, respectively, were introduced in the 1950s following the Soviet Union. This was to give mothers of small children a chance to be fully involved in the labour force. An opportunity to affect education of small children in a desired manner also appears to have been another reason for enforcing public pre-school education, though never made public. Family, the government supposed (and – as it turned out – very rightly so), could not be trusted to bring up children in accordance with Marx-Lenin doctrine. Even though we do not have data on individual attitudes of parents, there is information available on pre-school facilities, i e number of kindergartens and the placement rate (see figure 1).

Interested in developing pre-school facilities, the state brought about a high percentage of children in nursery schools and kindergartens. That enabled mothers to get employed so that – as the official doctrine asserted – contrary to capitalist world they could become equalised with men and liberalised from their household chores.[3] However, many experts have been sceptical

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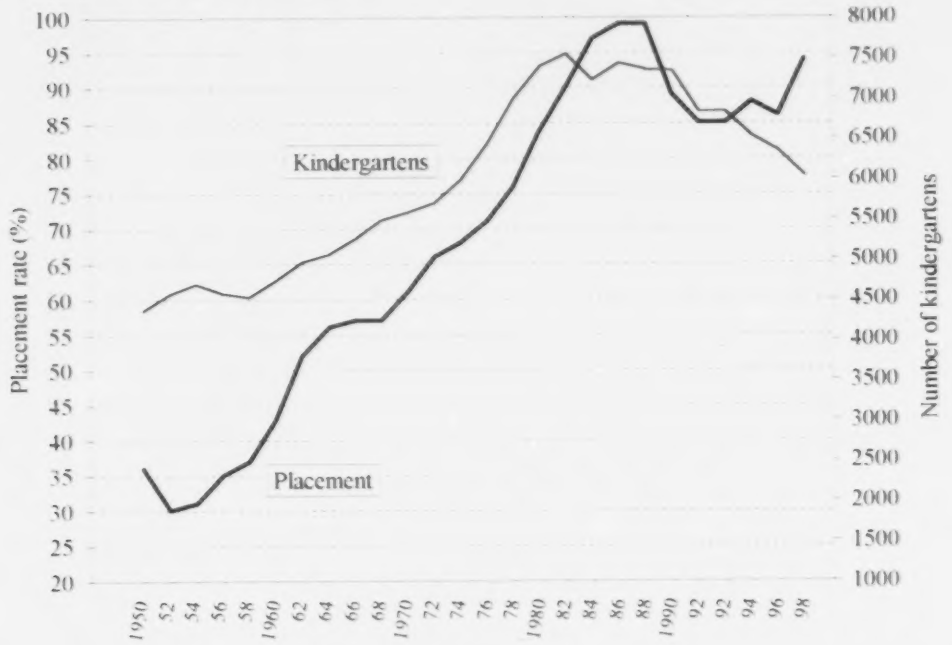
[2] Attending a kindergarten is quite common with five-year olds the year before they start the primary school as a way of preparing for the compulsory school education.

[3] So, egalitarian approach to the women's employment has been established a decade earlier than Western feminists even started to dream about it.

about results of this trend, pointing out to weaker family ties, a lack of parents' freedom of choice, and child care and education void of emotions important to small children. As a matter of fact, some describe the generation of people who are in their 30s and 40s now as a "nursery generation."

Figure 1: Placement rate of children* in kindergartens and number of kindergartens, the Czech Republic 1950–1998



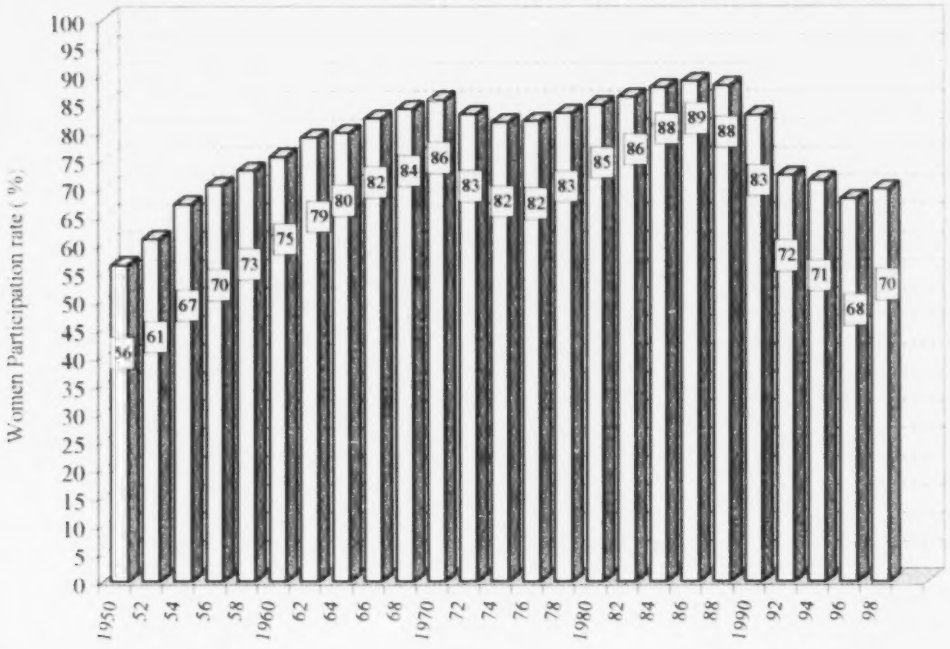
*Placement rate is the proportion of children attending kindergartens at the given year out of the 3-5 year old population

Source: Historical Statistical Yearbook of CSSR + Statistical Yearbooks (different volumes)

The number of children in public pre-school facilities and employed women (see figure 2) culminated in the 1980s in the Czech Republic. In 1984–1988, 97-99% of children aged 3 to 5 attended kindergartens and almost 90% of female working age (15-54) population were employed[4]. During the same period, a compulsory educational program reached a climax in the kindergartens. Those were becoming an overly intellectual and ideological schools rather than a place where children could play, socialise with their peers in a natural manner, and peacefully develop their abilities.

[4] The decrease in the 1990s was brought about by increased numbers of young women attending higher education, by unemployment, and also by new possibility of earlier retirement.

Figure 2: Female participation rate – share of employed women out of female working age (15-54) population



Source: Statistical Yearbooks of CR

No wonder parents turned their backs on nursery schools and kindergartens right after political changes in 1989. Both of these facilities became subject to professional as well as public criticism. While nursery schools almost disappeared[5], children-friendlier kindergartens have been coming back since the mid 1990s. In addition to state kindergartens, private and church facilities were also established even though the latter are rather rare (1.4% and 0.3% private and church kindergartens, respectively). Nevertheless, they became an alternative for parents refusing to put their children in school-like kindergartens.

Some professionals and teachers in the kindergartens found it difficult to deal with the criticism these facilities have been subject to since 1989[6]. They have argued that an institution traditionally considered one of the few assets of the Czech educational system is now being disregarded with the state failing to support and promote them. "Why are we rejecting our kindergartens everybody should feel envious about," they ask.

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[5] As far as nursery schools (creches), in 1989 about 20% of all children in the age-group of six months to three years were cared for there. After that year almost all creches disappeared due to reduced demand of parents.

[6] These findings are based on discussions of the author of this paper, a former 1990–94 President of the Czech Committee of the World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) which had with kindergarten teachers.

b) The 1990s

As noted above, the number of kindergartens decreased in the early 1990s due to several reasons: parents' mistrust, professional criticism, low rate of economic return for cities that operated the kindergartens, the fact that parents were being charged in contrast to free kindergartens in the previous years, demographic trend leading to a lower number of children of kindergarten age, etc.

Even though the entire Czech society developed from socialism to capitalism throughout the 1990s emphasising de-etatisation and related individualism, social policies that could significantly affect the "family or public care" dilemma have hardly changed since the socialism era preserving relatively generous measures: long, four-year maternal leave, child-birth benefit, parental benefit, etc.

However, individual attitudes have changed in many respects and as data from social surveys indicate, attitudes of parents to family and public pre-school child care have also changed. One of them was The European Value Study (EVS) 1991 and 1999[7] which comprised several items used as indicators relevant to this paper. I selected survey questions in which the respondents showed their attitudes to the following statements:

1. "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure relationship with her children as a mother who does not work."
2. "A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works."

Tables 1 and 2 show distributions of respondents agreeing and disagreeing with the above statements.

Table 1: A working mother can establish just as warm and secure relationship with her children as a mother who does not work

	1991	1999
Strongly agree	19	30
Agree	44	50
Disagree	34	18
Strongly disagree	3	2

Source: EVS91 (N=2109) and EVS99 (N=1809)

[7] EVS is an international comparative longitudinal survey aimed at finding out changes in values of the European population. European countries have been participating since the 1980s. The former Czechoslovakia entered in September 1991 when a representative sample of 2,109 Czech respondents (Slovaks were interviewed separately) aged 18 to 80 was subject to a survey. This paper refers to the above as EVS91 survey. In May 1999, the Czech Republic organized a second round with a representative sample comprising 1,809 respondents aged 18 to 80 (EVS99).

Overall, in 1999 there was a higher proportion of people who agreed that a working woman can mother her children emotionally in the same way as a mother who is not employed than in 1991 (80% : 63%). In compliance with the logic of our explanation, women, respondents with university-level degrees and older respondents (60 years or more) were likelier to agree with this statement in both surveys. Younger respondents (18 to 29 years) currently facing this issue were the least likely to agree as many of them have small children. In 1991, an approximately the same percentage of childless respondents (66%) and respondents with one or more children agreed whereas in 1999 parents tended to agree more frequently (75% and 84 %).

Similar attitude was recorded also in the second item (see table 2). Also here the 1991 respondents were more likely than the 1999 ones to agree with the statement, that a child suffers when his/her mother works (70% : 47%).

Table 2: A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works

	1991	1999
Strongly agree	24	9
Agree	46	38
Disagree	29	50
Strongly disagree	1	3

Source: EVS91 (N=2109) and EVS99 (N=1809)

Interestingly, men tend to more frequently believe that a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works both in 1991 and 1999. In 1991, this opinion was inversely proportional to education of respondents whereas this relationship did not occur in 1999. Responses also differed by age of the respondents. In the first survey, 80% of respondents from the oldest generation (60+) stated that a child suffers if his or her mother works. Their attitudes reflect unfavourable experience from the previous period. Currently, only 59% of "modern" people in their sixties favoured this opinion. Both surveys showed that the younger the respondent, the less likely a support of this opinion. Respondents experienced in bringing up children tended to agree more frequently than the childless ones.

In both cases, we can see quite a significant change in opinions on the affects of mother's employment on a small child's life. Responses in 1991 clearly appeared to reflect frustrations stemming from the real socialism period when the mother was forced to work not only by the financial situation but also social conventions as well as the fact that many parents did not trust the communist child care. How do we, however, explain results from 1999?

I believe the results may indicate a number of facts. First, current kindergartens meet parents' expectations more than they used to and working parents have become less apprehensive of taking advantage of their services.[8] Kindergartens promote their effort to create an environment for children as similar to the family as possible and work with the parents to meet their expectations. In addition, a centrally planned curriculum has been dismissed, giving a chance to the kindergarten teachers to create educational programs they and the parents like better. In this way, the uniformity of kindergartens has been eliminated.[9]

Second, there are new ways of providing a trouble-free child care when the mother is not at home. For example, baby-sitting has become more common even though it is possible and more typical for families with higher incomes. In other words, there are new ways of combining the mother's job with pre-school child care without the family having to rely on state nursery schools or kindergartens.

Individual focus and parents' cynicism on accumulating wealth rather than caring for good relationships within the family offer yet another explanation. However, such cynicism could also be due to the family needing two incomes (*"We both need to work now and the kids must go to kindergartens – so why the fuss?"*). While "liberalising women by work" and "forming the child in the kindergarten" used to be forced upon people by a state ideology, the market economy is essentially doing the same these days. However, this is a decision to be made by each of us. We live in a free democratic country and, therefore, we have to justify our decisions to ourselves.

As noted above, I believe that parents' attitude to public socialisation is related to the woman's changing role in the family. Tables 3 to 5 support this assertion: not only opinions on employment of the mother and child care but also attitudes to the roles women play at work and in family changed.

Table 3: A job is all right but what most women really want is a home and children

	1991	1999
Strongly agree	29	12
Agree	55	61
Disagree	15	27
Strongly disagree	1	1

[8] Current results from the survey organised within Thematic Review of early childhood education and care policy in The Czech Republic confirm it: 99% of parents with a child of pre-school age is generally satisfied with the kindergarten where their offspring is placed.

[9] Recently, attempts have been made to produce kindergarten standards and curriculum. However, these could not match the former state programs much stricter and more binding in nature.

Table 4: Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay

	1991	1999
Strongly agree	30	16
Agree	54	61
Disagree	15	22
Strongly disagree	1	2

Source: EVS91 (N=2109) and EVS99 (N=1809)

Table 5: Having a job is the best way for a woman to be an independent person

	1991	1999
Strongly agree	13	15
Agree	49	61
Disagree	36	23
Strongly disagree	2	1

Source: EVS91 (N=2109) and EVS99 (N=1809)

In 1999, percentages of respondents that agree with the three statements decreased (and percentages of respondents that disagree increased). This fact shows that the Czech population tended to employed women rather than housewives throughout the 1990s.

The survey which was produced just recently by Public Opinion Institute (Institut, 2000) is focusing on division of responsibilities related to child care and household. Although half of respondents answered that caring about children should be responsibility of both parents and half of respondents saw it as a responsibility of mother (almost no answers about responsibility of fathers), reality is different: mostly it is a mother who take care, in 28% of cases both partners take care and in no case it is father. As far as the household is concerned, mothers again play a more important role. Czech families came out as a favouring a traditional household with the mother being responsible.

Based on a research on stratification, labour division and value orientation of the transforming Czech family, Tuček (1998) also notes that in the Czech Republic partners are more frequently perceived as playing their traditional roles, women feel double-burdened of work both in their jobs and at home, and they think there is an unfair division of labour. The situation is magnified by the fact that "in the Czech Republic, a majority of economically active women works on a full-time basis whereas in other countries only about a half of economically active women has full-time jobs" (Tuček, 1998:86).

Women in the Czech Republic are said to work two shifts, the first being their job and the second, just as demanding, their household and child care. However, results of EVS91 and EVS99 show that these attitudes (and ideologies) are slowly changing. The mentioned survey of public opinion shows nevertheless that actual changes in the households are yet to come.

Conclusion

How do we interpret the above facts with regards to the former state policies related to employment of women as well as current economic liberalism? There is no doubt that conservative approach, better to say neo-conservative approach saying that till the certain age of the child mother should stay at home and take care about the child, is still prevailing pattern in The Czech Republic. The common definition of the "certain age" is usually 3 to 4 years.

In comparison to 1991, indicators suggest in the EVS99 survey that public pre-school child care and education are not a necessary evil following from the financial and social situation of the family, and kindergartens may become more important. High-quality kindergartens providing a good environment for the children will certainly be an asset. During the first half of the 1990s, the public pre-school child care went through changes from both quality and quantity points of views in the Czech Republic. We find these changes necessary as a starting point for normal communication between the institutional pre-school care and the family in the favour of child.

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